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Identifying the Ethical (Unethical) Undercurrent of Identified Surveys

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Although it is important to bring up the discussion of identified surveys, it seems that Saari and Scherbaum (2011) have not addressed two pertinent underlying questions: ''Are identified surveys intrinsically moral or ethical?'' and ''Should industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists be involved in their use?'' I argue that we cannot avoid the core issues of morality involved in the broader sense. Furthermore, I argue that contemplation of the underlying moral issues concerning identified surveys should be more salient to our decisions of whether or not to use identified surveys than the psychometric reasoning against them (e.g., possible decrease in validity due to lowered response rate and/or to response bias) *or* their potential benefits. Although Saari and Scherbaum briefly mentioned three ethical concerns, I go a bit further and get at the core of the issue.

There are two main viewpoints of morality: deontology and consequentialism. The deontological stance argues that morality should be based on whether an action is inherently right or wrong, irrespective of the outcomes or potential benefits and harms (Lefkowitz, 2003). The consequentialist perspective of morality, however, suggests that morality be measured by the relative good that comes out of a decision instead of ''their inherent rightness or wrongness'' (Lefkowitz, 2003, p. 65). Therefore, according to the consequentialist viewpoint, the positive outcomes or consequences should be compared to the potential drawbacks of the choice or behavior. It is evident that any discussion of weighing the potential benefits and detriments of identified surveys is consequentialist in nature. Although this is logical in the way in which most business is conducted, the argument can be made that perhaps the consequentialist mode of morality may not be the only route to making a decision regarding the use of identified surveys. Given most of the principles and guidelines that our field entails are written in a deontological manner, it is at least worthy of argument that a deontological stance should be taken on this issue. Hence, the two aforementioned questions must be asked.

To answer these questions, we must delve into the code that defines what the field of psychology should and should not do, the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (APA, 2002). Several general principles as well as more specific and enforceable ethical standards in the APA code are relevant to the discussion on identified surveys. First of all, the principle regarding beneficence and nonmaleficence should be considered: ''Psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care to do no harm'' (p. 3). The fact that identified surveys require the indefinite linking of employee identification information with their survey data leads to

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at least the potential for this information to be misused or breached to outside parties. If data are collected in a manner that holds this identifying information, what happens if the data get used for retention or firing decisions, salaries become based on this, or managers discover the specifics of what certain employees wrote about them? Although Saari and Scherbaum discuss methods of separating identifiers from the data via linking them with anonymous codes, identified surveys still result in a higher possibility of the data being misused than data derived from unidentified surveys. Therefore, there is no guarantee that respondents' data will be protected. It is clear that this could undermine the attempt at establishing trust within the survey administration, within the organization overall, and within the field of psychology.

The issue of trust is deeply intertwined in the issue of identified surveys. The general principle of fidelity and responsibility is closely linked with trust as well: ''Psychologists establish relationships of trust with those with whom they work'' (APA, 2002, p. 3). Saari and Scherbaum rightfully acknowledge this possible loss of trust as something that could further discredit surveys within an organization or at the very minimum may negatively affect employee responses on a survey in which they know they are identified or even on future surveys if they find out that they were previously identified without being told that this was the case. Trust, which is integrated into our general principles, is of importance not only to us as psychologists but of course to the employees themselves as well. According to Saari and Scherbaum, ''from an employee's perspective, surveys provide an opportunity to provide candid feedback about the organization, express views about the work environment, and impact change in the organization.'' If employees no longer feel that they can be candid due to lack of trust in the survey system, not only are our psychometric properties of our surveys exposed to bias, but our principle of fidelity and responsibility is damaged as well, as this principle explains the importance of creating trusting relationships with the people involved in their work.

The general principle of integrity is also connected with the value of truthfulness and honesty. Saari and Scherbaum discuss that at times, identified surveys are conducted without thoroughly explaining the limits of confidentiality and anonymity, which can lead respondents to think that their responses are indeed anonymous when it is impossible for surveys of this nature to be this way. They also explain that some surveys are conducted in a manner that makes it unclear to respondents that their identifying information is in fact going to be retained. They mention these scenarios but don't explain them through the ethical viewpoint that shows these situations clearly straddle the line that the general principle of integrity meant to be clear.

Another relevant general principle to the issue at hand is that of respect for people's rights and dignity. This is at the very core of how the field of psychology should treat those with whom we work. This principle refers directly to the importance of people's privacy and confidentiality among other salient rights, and these are linked to more specific ethical standards included in the APA code (2002). This includes the standard 3.10 of informed consent that specifies that even psychologists who provide assessment, which includes I–O psychologists conducting surveys in organizations, must ''use language that is reasonably understandable'' (p. 6). Saari and Scherbaum state that enough information should be explained to employees so that they have the informed choice of whether to participate in the survey or not. However, again the enforcement of this cannot be guaranteed in the use of identified surveys and is a further reason why our field must examine the underlying core ethical issues to decide whether arguments suggesting this risk is worth taking for the data are actually how we should approach the topic. Perhaps we should be asking ''Is it really ethical to conduct identified surveys in terms of the

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ethical principles and standards set up to protect respondents?''

Although it is not deontologically wrong to ask employees what their true opinions and attitudes are, there does seem to be a deontological argument against forcing all respondents of a survey to have their identifying information linked to their data. In these cases, employees could feel coerced to respond. I instead argue that respondents should continue to be more protected via unidentified surveys, or employers could make the identifying information ''voluntary only'' to comply with the general principles and ethical standards (APA, 2002) previously discussed.

Although the ways in which most of the APA general principles and ethical standards relevant to the issue of identified surveys are written are in line with a deontological moral stance of what one should or should not do (e.g., psychologists should show respect for dignity and others' rights), the issue of identified surveys as presented by Saari and Scherbaum is one of a consequentialist stance. Why then are our principles disconnected with the way in which this modern issue is discussed? Shouldn't they instead be at the core of the conversation due to the fact that the field of psychology overall seems to place them there? Although some may view the deontological viewpoint on identified surveys as ''too idealized'' because it may seem to disregard the real-life organization's reasons for implementing them, I argue that the moral deontological argument against their use is nonetheless worthy of a seat at the roundtable discussion because perhaps our focus should not only be what the organization wants but instead how employee respondents should be treated.

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